

Mr. SCOTT of Virginia: Mr. Speaker, I rise today to introduce the "Every Student Counts Act," legislation that will prioritize high school graduation for all of our nation's students.

In 2001, the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) passed with broad bipartisan support. The purpose of NCLB was to ensure that every student in America would receive a quality education. However, over the past ten years, NCLB has not lived up to its promises. Certain aspects of the law are difficult to implement and are not bringing about the results we thought it would. One of the major shortcomings of NCLB is its failure to hold schools accountable for dropouts. Although we believed we addressed this issue in the original NCLB legislation, this portion of the law has not been implemented as we had hoped. Instead, under current law, the only meaningful accountability standard for high schools is students' scores on standardized tests, with virtually no concern given to how many students graduate or drop out of school. Unfortunately, this myopic accountability standard has created an incentive for high schools to push out students who are struggling academically, so that their test scores are not counted in the assessments. Furthermore, the current accountability system also has allowed States to report graduation rates inconsistently and in misleading ways. Finally, NCLB does not require the disaggregation of graduation rates by subgroup, leading to incomplete data on how our schools are doing with one subgroup compared to others.

What is clear is the fact that the current high school accountability system is failing both our students and our nation. Each year, approximately 1.23 million secondary school students--one-third of all secondary school students--fail to graduate with their peers. In addition, nearly 2,000 secondary schools--roughly 12 percent of all secondary schools in the United States--produce about half of the nation's secondary school dropouts. In these schools, the number of seniors is routinely 60 percent or less than the number of freshmen three years earlier. Moreover, almost half of the nation's African-American students and nearly 40 percent of Latino students attend these so called "dropout factories," while only 11 percent of White students do.

Unfortunately, these dismal numbers are just the beginning of the story. Research shows that the difference in lifetime earnings between a high school dropout and a high school graduate is about \$260,000. A dropout's loss in potential earnings can cause serious hardships throughout his or her life. For example, statistics show that high school dropouts are more likely to be on public assistance programs such as welfare than students who complete high school. In addition, high school dropouts that do find employment are much more likely to work at unskilled jobs that offer little opportunity for upward mobility. There is also a strong correlation between high school dropouts and juvenile delinquency and teen pregnancy. Therefore, we cannot sit back and allow this problem to escalate. We must hold schools, districts and states accountable for graduation rates and dropouts so that all students are graduating with a high school diploma and improving their life outcomes.

By holding schools, districts and states accountable for graduation rates and dropouts, we also

improve America's position as a leader in the global economy. According to the 2008 Department of Labor report entitled "America's Dynamic Workforce," by 2016 almost 90 percent of the fastest growing and best paying jobs in the United States will require at least some postsecondary education. Yet, an estimated 3.5 million Americans ages 16 to 25 are not enrolled in school and do not have a high school diploma. Attaining a high school diploma is a student's first step toward becoming an educated member of the American workforce. An American workforce that lacks a considerable number of high school graduates--and a considerable number of college graduates--will eventually diminish our nation's global competitiveness. The major advantage America has in the global economy is an educated workforce. We can't allow--or afford--any of our nation's high students to dropout and not reach their full potential.

Until recently, federal policy did not place enough importance on graduating the nation's high school students. In October 2008, the U.S. Department of Education released regulations that did much to correct the lack of attention to graduation rates in the federal accountability system; the regulations require a uniform graduation rate calculation and improvement in graduation rates over time. Though these regulations are a laudable step in the right direction, they do not go far enough in setting consistent, high graduation rate goals and aggressive, attainable graduation rate growth targets. Without clear guidance and meaningful accountability, most secondary schools can continue to achieve Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) by making negligible annual improvement in graduation rates and can do so with a consistent, or even growing, graduation gap. In fact, under current law even a so called "dropout factory" can make AYP.

The Every Student Counts Act will bring meaningful accountability to America's high schools by requiring a consistent and accurate calculation of graduation rates across all fifty states to ensure comparability and transparency. The legislation builds on the National Governors Association's Graduation Rate Compact, which was signed by all 50 of the nation's governors in 2005. Under the Every Student Counts Act, graduation rates become a significant factor in determining AYP in addition to test scores. Moreover, the Every Student Counts Act would require high schools to have aggressive, attainable and uniform annual growth requirements as part of AYP. This will ensure consistent increases to graduation rates for all students by meeting annual, research-based benchmarks with the long-term goal of reaching a 90 percent graduation rate. The bill would also require the disaggregation of graduation data by subgroup to make certain that schools are held accountable for increasing the graduation rate for all of our students and require that school improvement activities focus on closing any achievement gaps.

Recognizing that some small numbers of students take longer than four years to graduate, the bill will give credit to schools, school districts and states for graduating these students while maintaining the primacy of graduating the great preponderance of all students in four years. The Every Student Counts Act will provide incentives for schools, districts and states to create programs to serve students who have already dropped out and are over-age or under credited. Some credit has to be given to those who get a GED and also those who take more than one or two years and maybe even three years longer than others to graduate. If no credit is given, the school system has no incentive to continue these important programs.

Some states have already taken the initiative to implement reforms similar to those included in the Every Student Counts Act. I am proud to say that my home state of Virginia is one of them. For example, since 2008 Virginia has been using the "Virginia On-Time Graduation Rate" calculation, a flexible graduation rate calculation that accurately measures the number of students from a freshman class who graduate four years later. In addition, Virginia will start using a "Graduation and Completion Index" in addition to standardized test scores in order to determine the accreditation ratings of high schools in the Commonwealth. High schools must earn a score of 85 on the "Graduation and Completion Index" to receive full accreditation from the state. The requirement will go into effect during the 2011-2012 school year. Reforms like these have had and will have a positive impact on Virginia's graduation rate and should be implemented nationwide.

Thus far, 24 national and state organizations support the Every Student Counts Act, including the Alliance for Excellent Education, America's Promise Alliance, American Association of University Women, American School Counselor Association, Bazelon Center for Mental Health Law, Council of Administrators of Special Education, First Focus, Knowledge Alliance, Learning Disabilities Association of America, League of United Latin American Citizens, National Association of School Psychologists, National Association of Secondary School Principals, National Association of State Directors of Career Technical Education Consortium, National Association for the Education of Homeless Children and Youth, National Collaboration for Youth, National Council of La Raza, National Council for Learning Disabilities, National Indian Education Association, National PTA, Project GRAD, Public Education Network, School Social Work Association of America, Southeast Asia Resource Action Center (SEARAC), Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages, United Way Worldwide, and Youth Service America. This list is expected to grow.

In order to truly ensure that all children have access to a quality education, it is imperative that we take steps to immediately end America's dropout crisis. We must ensure not only that graduation rates increase, but that earning a high school diploma is a meaningful accomplishment. We must use the indicators of student achievement and graduation to know which high schools are doing their job. Those who are must be recognized and supported. Those that are not must be identified and improvements made.

I hope that with the Every Student Counts Act we can make greater strides nationally toward graduating more of America's students and preparing them to succeed in college, the workforce, the military, and ultimately in life. I ask my colleagues to join me in passing this bill and seeing to it that it is quickly enacted into law to ensure--at a minimum--that every child becomes a high school graduate.